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ABSTRACT

The prototype of the modern youth novel emerged in the second half of the 19th century, and books written specifically for either male or female youths often covered similar storylines and themes, usually educational in purpose. Changes in the readership emerged rather slowly, but a dramatic shift in ideas about children's literature was inspired by the events of 1968, when the problem-oriented youth literature was born. Typical books of this genre consistently covered the same topics: alcoholics, abortion, death, divorce, drugs, juvenile delinquency, mental and physical handicaps, sexuality, suicide, war, etc. But soon after this, writers began experimenting with concepts drawn from postmodernism, including the notion of fragmentation, the loss of traditionally valued qualities like depth and coherence, and various disorienting techniques. Experimental youth novels also drew components from science fiction, film and video. The implied readers of these books are 15-16 (secondary school age), but they are often read by younger children who do not fully understand what they are reading. The youth novel today demands much more of its readers than it formerly did, and sometimes it demands too much. Thus, besides the technical skills involved with reading, experimental youth literature also often requires a certain maturity, experience, and intellectual prowess. Of course, writers should be allowed to experiment, and there remains a need for serious youth novels. However, if the writers of these books forget their readers, youth and the youth novel will go their separate ways, and the only readers of these books will be adults. (HB)

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ABSTRACT

The prototype of the modern youth novel emerged in the second half of the 19th century, and not till a hundred years later did a new development take place when, inspired by the events of 1968, the problem-oriented youth literature was born. But soon writers were also beginning to experiment with a fragmented composition and magic forces in the youth novel.

Some of the concepts drawn from postmodernism such as "fragmentary", loss of "traditionally valued qualities of depth and coherence" and "disorienting techniques" can be used to describe the experimental youth novels. Components may even be drawn from science fiction, and there is also a close relationship to film and video. The implied readers of these books are 15-16, but they are often read by younger children who do not fully understand what they read. It is important to understand that maturity and experience is needed in addition to technical skill in reading.

Writers should, of course, be allowed to experiment, and we need the serious youth novel, but if the writers forget their readers, there is a danger that the youth and the youth novel part company, and the only readers left will be adults:librarians, teachers, critics.

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POSTMODERNISM IN YOUTH LITERATURE - A ROAD AWAY FROM THE READER?

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Postmodernism and youth literature - a juxtaposition of two concepts that each is difficult, not to say impossible to define. Postmodernism is an ambiguous term which seems to have as many meanings as there are attempts to define it. It has been said that postmodernity is a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals. Furthermore, postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world.

As for youth literature, the problem of definition is deceptively simple, being mostly related to the age of the reader. We usually have an idea of what youth is, and we may use several explanations: adolescence - the period between childhood and maturity; teenager - 13 to 19 years old; or young adults. The difficulty does not arise until we try to relate "youth" to a limited subject, such as: what kind of

books are especially appropriate for youth. Do we then talk about 13 or 19 year old readers?

I hope we shall get closer to an understanding of these questions by a gradual approach, starting with the development of youth literature.

In the more than two thousand year long history of written literature, the idea of special books for young people, whether they be children or adolescents, is not much more than two-three hundred years old if we don't include the religious tracts written for children in the 17th century. While the novel was coming into its own as a popular means of pastime for readers from all classes, children's books were first and foremost intended for educational purposes. When John Newbury in 1744 marketed his first children's book, *A Little Pretty Pocketbook*, he announced it in the spirit of Horace's "utile dulce", - "delighting and instructing the reader" claiming that it was: *intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly.*

An even better example of the way Newbury catered to the demand that children's books should be useful, is the title of his most famous publication in 1751:

> *The Lilliputian Magazine; or the Young Gentleman and Lady's Golden Library. Being an Attempt to mend the World, to render the Society of Man more Amiable and to Establish the Plainness, Simplicity, Virtue, and Wisdom of the Golden Age, so much celebrated by the Poets and Historians.*

I shall not bore you by repeating the whole history of children's literature, where the stress has been more on the usefulness than on the amusement in the origin of children's books. As for division according to age, Aidan Chambers has called attention to Sara Trimmer who in 1802 tried to class books according to age "by supposing all young gentlemen and ladies to be *Children* till they are *fourteen*, and *young persons* till they are at least *twenty-one*." [1] In spite of this early attempt

at distinction between books for children and books for youth, the tendency was more towards division according to sex, while at the same time boys and girls as readers were separated from smaller children and infants.

While the utilitarian principle of children's literature was to survive for a long time to come, the first children's books intended for pure amusement at the middle of the 19th century, with *A Book of Nonsense* in 1846 and the even more influential *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865. This may be said to be the beginning of *modernism* in children's literature, that is to say a literature whose aim is to amuse, not to teach.

The concept of education lived on especially in books for girls, or young ladies as they were often called in an attempt to flatter the reader. Though the main function of these books was to serve as a homily on how to behave to be accepted in society, and not least, how to catch a husband, they may be called literature for youth, though limited to the female half. Sometimes a talented author wrote so well that the readers forgot the message or read the book in a way different from what the author had intended, as was the case with *Little Women* by Louisa Alcott first published in 1868, and still in print as a Puffin book. In a way, this can be said to be the beginning of a genre that was still alive a few decades ago.

While books for "young ladies" put emphasis on life in the home, on emotional ties and on good behaviour, books for boys had a much wider range where leaving home was usually necessary to win experience and enjoy exciting adventures. These books were, and still to a certain extent are, aimed at readers of all ages, "boys from 7 to 70" as they were often advertised, but often read by girls as well. Action is their main point, and lively incidents must take place the whole time. The demand for action may be called an *epic imperative* while depiction of characters and verisimilitude of events are of less importance. This in a way, has made boys' books more univeral because they are not so closely related to certain norms of social behaviour as are the girls' books. Changes in girls' gender role have, with a few exceptions, made girls' books obsolete because girls are no longer expected to behave in the same way as their mothers. *Little Women*

is no longer seen as providing an ideal, but *Treasure Island* is still an exciting adventure, and Huck Finn om his raft is almost timeless.

There is, however, a similarity between *Huckleberry Finn* and *Little Women*. Both books deal with young people on the threshold of adulthood, going through a development from thoughtless child into a situation where they have to take the responsibility for their own lives as well as those of others, whether through marriage as in the case of the girls, or by learning to deal with the norms of society as Huck learns through his relationship with the Negro slave Jim. These two books might be said constitute a kind of prototype of the genre called youth literature: books about adolescents facing the problems encountered in the stages between childhood and adulthood.

But whether anticipating marriage or independence of family, the great difference between the destiny of boys and girls, there was always an undercurrent of moralizing in accordance with the bourgois values of the time. The young readers were given an idealized picture of what society expected of adolescence depending on the situation and the gender of the protagonist. An important component was the relationship between writer and reader. The writers more or less knew that their readers would belong to a rather close circle of middle class society, as would the characters in their books, except when the writer wanted to give the readers a glimpse of another kind of society, for instance by depicting slum conditions in order to teach the important virtue of charity. Many facts of reality were excluded from the books, and others were glossed over, in conformity with what society appropriate. Marriage might be the undisguised goal of girls, but the mention of sexuality was taboo.

The themes were varied in many ways, but the essence of what was to be the modern youth novel may be said to have been developed in the second half of the 19th century, though the term youth literature was not as yet in common use. The books were mostly divided into boys' books and girls' books, and sometimes one might talk of books for young girls - or ladies. Whatever it was called, the genre continued for about a hundred years without much changing its form, its content or its implied message. What changed were the readers and the society in which they lived.

For one thing, not only did the number of potential readers grow as education became more widespread, but the readership became more hetereogenous comprising youth from different social strata. The middle class no longer had a monopoly on literature though for a long time to come the old bourgois ideals would dominate in literature for children and youth. Perhaps as a result of this, but probably more because of a general change in the view of children, the readers became younger, and books that were intended for 14-16 year old readers, were read by children of 10 to 13. One of the results of this was that the writers no longer knew with any confidence who their readers were.

The changes in readership were gradual, but another circumstance influenced the direction of youth literature as well as our whole Western world so to say overnight: the events of 1968. Leaving aside the consequences for society, the implications for youth literature were significant. A few authors had even before this raised points of contemporary problems in youth novels, but now writers wanted to discuss all kinds of current political and social questions in books for youth and even for children. And they discussed these questions not according to traditional values, or in continuation of bourgeois moralizing. They sided with the youth they wrote about, apparently defending even serious crime, and indirectly og directly urging the readers to revolt against society. What the writers did not seem to realize, was that the readers seldom, probably never, were the unhappy, asocial outcast to whom the books were addressed.

In the following I shall sketch the typical books of the period, and I am sure you will recognize the topics which I shall mention in alphabetical order: Abortion, alcoholics, the atomic bomb, conscientious objection, death, divorce, drugs, juvenile delinquency, mental and physical handicaps, mobbing inside and outside school, old age, peace movement, sexuality, suicide, unemployment, unmarried mothers, war, women's emancipation.

Many of these subjects concerned adults more than young people, but some authors would also deal with topics of special interest to adolescense. Less talented writers who lacked the ability to do more than scratch the surface, would often mix together several serious problems into a salad that I have been tempted to call problem-pornography. This kind of books were read with shuddering

excitement mostly by girls of 11-12. There were also earnest writers who wanted to reach young adults to make them aware of the vital problems of society, but their books were usually lumped with the other youth books and cosumed by younger readers while adolescents looked elsewhere for reading material.

The new area of topics required a new language. Structure and grammar became relaxed, the style more verbal, trying to imitate the way youngsters talked, or rather what writers imagined to be idiomatic. Sometimes the result was a real innovation that brought new energy to the literature, but at other times it served as en excuse for bad writing. The important point to all these writers was, however, to bring a message across to the reader, and for this reason they tried to be as plain and unambiguous as possible.

In spite of the many weak points of the problem oriented books of the 1970's, they can be said to have opened up a new road for youth literature by making it permissable to write about all kinds of subjects without restrictions, and to experiment with language. Even if the authors still kept mostly to the accepted form of youth literature, "the epic imperative", by putting excitement into the narrative to keep the reader interested, a new kind of youth novel had emerged. Approximately at the same time, some writers began to experiment with new forms in youth literature. Their purpose was to give the youth novel a literary valid form on a par with the novel for adults, choosing young people as their characters to relate to their readers. The situations and the problems encountered would often be only implicit connected with modern youth, but was calculated to catch their interest.

Contributory factors to many of these books were fantastic fiction and magic realism as well science fiction that invited to playing with time and space.

An early example is Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* from 1967, where three young people in Wales re-enact the Celtic tragedy of Lleu, Blodeuwedd and Gronw Pebyr, while at the same time light is shed on problems experienced by the three present-day characters. The novel has been called a milestone in Britsh youth literature of the 1960's, and exactly for that reason was probably difficult to read at the time of its first publication.

Other writers have prefered a realistic setting, but used a fragmented composition. An example is Aidan Chambers who in *Dance on my Grave* (1982) used a kind of collage consisting of notes with flashbacks written by the protagonist Hal after the event, reports from the social worker, Hal's English composition in school, letters and cuttings from a newspaper. The resemblance to film and video technique is reinforced by Hal's use of the term rewinding. Aidan Chambers is not, however, interested only in breaking up the traditional composition, he also wants to introduce a difficult subject, homosexuality. By the way Hal approaches his own situation, not only does he gradually come to understand himself better, but the reader shares his insight.

Dance on my grave is an interesting youth novel, using postmodern effects, such as fragmenting the text and breaking up the composition, in a way that helps reader to better understanding. The language is no hindrance though mostly told by Hal, because he is an intelligent 16 year old who is used to express himself in writing as we see from his English composition.

It is now time to try a definition of postmodernism as used in connection with youth novels:

A key word is *fragmentary*. In a world that no longer can be seen as an integral whole, the writers choose a composition that mirrors the scattered picture of the world. As science contributes to the confusion by postulating new ideas about the universe, about space and time, the writers feel free to create a reality where magic forces from past or present, or even from another dimension may break in as a matter of course. Another key word is therefore *supernatural interference*, not as ghost stories, but as aspects of reality. The New Zealand writer Margaret Mahy has used the break with the ordinary in *The Changeover* (1984) to throw light on the transformation of adolescense that present-day Laura experiences. She has to go through the rites of becoming a witch to save her small brother from evil influences. In *The Tricksters* (1986) three characters from another dimension visit the girl Harry's family at their summer resort and brings about a crisis in the family.

The four novels I have mentioned, *The Owl Service*, *Dance on my Grave*, *The Changeover* and *The Tricksters*, may serve as examples of the *beginning* of

postmodern youth novels. They are not really difficult to read when the initial reluctance to a new kind of telling a story has been overcome. But they are all actual *youth* novels, and expect a certain maturity and experience from their readers. Even then, all may not be understood, but the novels will make an impression deep enough to make the reading worth while. The haunting (by the way also a title of one of Margaret Mahy's books) is used not only to illuminate a realistic situation, but also to put a new kind of excitement into the books: the reader has to discover what is going on. This device has been used successfully by many writers who without indulging in cheap ghost stories want to get on speaking terms with otherwise reluctant readers.

These books have left behind them the urge to bring across a social or political *message*, the *raison d'être* of the problemoriented books, their import is to make the readers understand better the difficult change that takes place during the transition to adulthood (compare Margaret Mahy's title *The Change Over*).

And now we have to look at the definition of youth. When I asked Aidan Chambers what was the age of his implicit readers, he answered without hesitation: 16-17. Not all writers are so explicit, but it would not be out of place to regard the kind of books we talk about as written for young adults, that is to say 15-16 years old. In accordance with this, my definiton of youth, young adult or adolesense in connection with the youth novel, will be somebody about 15 - 16 years old, take or leave one year. It will not be boys and girls of 12-13 or even younger.

But as mentioned above, the readers of books given the stamp *youth* are usually much younger, down to 10-11, while the intended readers look with scorn on such books without deigning to find out what they are really like.

What is then the difference between a 13 year old and an 16 year old when understanding books is concerned? The books I have so far mentioned are not really difficult where language and presentation are concerned. They can be read by so called "good readers" of twelve, but will they really enjoy these books? What I want to emphasize is the fact that reading is much more than technical skill in understanding letters, words, and sentences. That is basic reading, necessary for everyday life, followed by the next step which is ability to read text books and

study one or more subjects in depth. But in reading fiction another development is needed, dependent on age, maturity, and emotional as well as intellectual understanding, and experience. What is easily comprehended by an adolescent may be completely beyond the understanding of a twelve year old, not because he is slow on the uptake, but because it is outside his understanding. On the other hand, what is new and exciting to the child of twelve, may be trivial to the youth of fifteen.

This tallies with the code-set Peter Hunt calls "life" when he claims that experience of text is the convergence (or clash) of two code-sets: those of "life", and of "text", where the code of text is knowledge of literary conventions, generic explanations, intertextual references etc. Integrating the codes of text and of genre will be an important part of the reading process. [2]

Peter Hunt draws our attention to an important point when he calls the implied audience for so called children's literature a developing one, and I think the difference in reading experience is one of the factors that seperate children and young adults in their attitude to literature.

Learning to read fiction is to learn to fill in telling gaps, to recognize the difference between genres, and to know what to expect, and when that has been learned, to be able to cope with changes in the horizons of expectation.

All books assume a certain knowledge and experience in the reader, depending among other things on the age of the implied audience. The writers cannot explain everything. To take a simple subject: when Alice enters a bus to go to town, even quite young children are expected to know what a bus and a town are, and that Alice, because of her name, is a girl. The older the readers are, the more they are expected to understand without being told. But filling in gaps in the text depends on more than knowledge, it is an appeal to imagination as well as experience.

We have only to look at the detailed and often longwinded novels of e.g. Dickens and Thakceray to understand how much it was once necessary to explain to a public not yet accustomed to reading novels. Modern novelists take it for granted that the readers understand more without being told. The youth novel has developed along the same lines, and the telling gaps give the readers a possibility

to use their own experience to relate to the characters and the situations in the book.

Recognizing a genre is another requirement. Reading *Crime and Punishment* believing it to be a crime story in the vein of Agatha Christie, is bound to make the readers disappointed, if not frustrated, if they ever get to finish the book. On the other hand, the experience may prepare the readers to accept what Hans Robert Jauss calls changes in the horizons of expectation: to be receptive to innovations of ideas and structure within an old form. [3] A typical example is the anti-hero of modern adventure stories.

The youth novel to-day demands more of its readers than formerly, and sometimes it demands too much. *Red Shift* (1973) by Alan Garner is an example of a books that even trained adults find difficult to read, with its shifts in time without warning or indications in the text. It belongs to the not insignificant group of youth novels - and children's literature for that matter, that adult critics praise and enjoy analysing, but young adults, the implied readers, only seldom read. There is a serious clash of interests where these books are concerned, because the encouragement of critics may increase the trend to write more or less impenetrable books for youth.

Obviously a certain amount of experiment is necessary even in youth novels, and may lead to interesting new ways of approaching the readers.
I do not wish to censor the publication of these books, authors should be free to write what they like, and publishers to publish what they want, - and readers to read what they choose. But I am afraid that the enthusiasm of critics may lead to an acceptance of these books as the best choice to offer young readers, and that the readers as a result will turn to light fiction. Not that I think that in itself is dangerous, but I am so oldfashioned that I believe literature to give a valuable dimension to our lives. And I think the youth novel should build a bridge to that literature.

Literature, however, is not the only creative influence in our lives. We are usually much more affected by other media, and in youth culture film, television, and not least video are indisputably the successful rivals of books. By looking closer at the competitors of literature, we might get a better understanding of

what the attraction is. Rock video shows us a fragmented world where there is no coherent story, but the combination of sound and picture makes a strong emotional impact on the viewers/listeners. In a way, this makes the audience accustomed to a fragmentary representation, but can it be transfered to literature? As mentioned, Aidan Cambers, as well as other writers, have been inspired by video in composing youth novels. The zooming in on characters, the quick cutting from one scene to another, the flashbacks or rewindings are all realted to film and video technique. The questions is whether reading is as easy as viewing.

If we take *Red Shift* and turn it into a video, some of the difficulties would disappear. We would know when we were in Roman time, when in the 17th century, and when in the present. The emotions would be heavily brought across, but would the depth of the problems be better understood?

If we again look at the definition of postmodernity I quoted at the beginning of this paper, we shall see that the description comes nearer to fit e.g. video than books. I repeat: fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals. Furthermore, postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world. I don't want to sit in judgement on video, but from what I have seen, several of the components mentioned can be found in at least some rock videos. As regards books, I think concepts like "fragmentary", loss of "traditionally valued qualities of depth and coherence" and "disorienting techniques" can be used to describe the experimental youth novels.

As reading usually demands more of the audience than viewing, I don't believe there is an easy road from the video to the book even if there is a superficial resemblance in the technique. Therefore, the more sophisticated the writers become in using the technique of the visual media, the more difficult their books will be, and the greater the distance between reader and writer. Another question is whether the sophisticated young adult, who has the ability to read youth novels, would not rather go straight on to adult literature. There is

nothing new in the fact that young people read other books beside those explicitly written for their age group, whether romance or adventure. It is sufficient to look at the authobiographies of writers such as Graham Green and Jean-Paul Sartre to get an impression of what kind of books children and adolescents actually enjoyed. You probably all have your own lists of favourites. What is new is that young adults may stop reading the books aimed at their age group.

In that case,what is the purpose of youth novels?

The serious youth novel should be able to tell the readers of circumstances and situations they do not find elsewhere. There should be a relevance to the readers' own problems, be they psychological or social, and the readers should also get to know the problems of other adolescent boys and girls different from themselves. In addition, new avenues of thought might be opend up and engage the readers in a critical attitude to their own specific situation as well as to the world at large. The main difference between a youth novel and a novel for adults on the same theme would probably be that the former look at the world from the point of view of young adults and portray characters of the same age whom the readers can relate to and recognize as their peers.

But the youth novel should not only reproduce a kind of youth culture, it should also prepare young adults for the society their are about to enter as adults with new priviliges and new responsibilities, and also new obstacles.

For these reasons we need the youth novel, and if the youth novel in the wake of postmodernism becomes a closed book to all but the sophisticated adult critics and a handful of precocious adolescents, even children who have been used to reading may turn away from literature when they grow older. When I earlier asserted that authors had freedom to write what they liked, I added that readers had the right to choose. We compel pupils to read a book as an assignment in class, and we can even help them understand a difficult text, but we cannot compel them to go on reading books that are alien to them.

There still are plenty of exciting, well-written books with themes that appeal to young adults. More important there are excellent books that the readers don't know because they have never had a go at them. It may be the title, the cover or just general lack of curiosity that keep readers away from books they

would enjoy. These books need to be presented to the readers in a way that will make them at least curious to see what it is all about.

As a transition from childhood to adulthood in reading habits, we need an intermediate phase where young adults learn to appreciate new kinds of books. But there are signs that on the one hand, adolescent readers regard books marketed as "youth novels" benath their dignity, and on the hand that many "youth novels" are too complicated for those willing to make a try at reading. Film and video are so much more accessible, especially when the books by trying to imitate the technique of visual media become more inaccessible.

There are, of course, still writers of youth novels who wish to write in a way that is easy to understand, and who have not forgotten the "epic imperative", but these writers seldom get the same critic acclaim as the literary more interesting books, interesting to adults, that is.

Other matters as well may put obstacles in the way of communication between youth literature and its readers, but I have chosen to concentrate on an aspect where experimentation to a certain extent has got the better of accessability. If this process, under the influence of postmodernism, continues, there may be not a telling gap, but a real gap between the writers and their implied readers.

Notes

1. Quoted by Aidan Chambers in: Booktalk. - London, 1985. - P.85

2. Hunt, Peter. Necsessary misreadings : directions in narrative theory for children's literature. - P. 107-121. - In: Studies in the literary imagination. - Vol. XVIII (1985), no.2

3. Jauss, Hans Robert. Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft. - P.144-207. - In: Literaturgeschichte als Provokation. - Frankfurt am Main, 1970